



The Frontline Supervisor

*Helping You Manage Your Company's
Most Valuable Resource - Employees*

November 2001

◆ It's been about two months since the attacks of September 11th, but my employees still spend a lot of work hours talking about it. How can I require employees to get back to their routines without being insensitive?

Although it has been many weeks since the September 11th attacks, employees may remain upset, particularly with the possibility of additional incidents in the future. Openly acknowledge the legitimacy of employees' emotions in response to these events. Consider hosting special times, such as lunch hour, for employees to talk and share. Draw a balance between being patient and supportive as you ask your employees to work toward returning to their routines. Although a horrific event has taken place, maintaining job standards can help employees return to a feeling of normalcy. Supervisors should encourage employees who are upset to call the EAP. If performance problems emerge and remain unresolved, a supervisor referral would be appropriate. Remember that making an EAP referral is not an accusatory act or punitive step in helping an employee.

◆ When I say "hello" or "good morning," my employee ignores me completely. Her work is good, but she does not like me. This behavior is very irritating. Should I also stop greeting her and leave this part of our relationship alone?

Your employee appears angry and avoids verbal interaction with you to demonstrate that anger. Your relationship will become more problematic if you reciprocate. Although this behavior is upsetting, your first approach should be to meet in private and discuss her refusal to acknowledge your greetings. Avoid scolding her, but describe your experience and your feelings in response to her behavior. Ask for change. You may feel vulnerable with this approach but pleased at the outcome. Follow up by seeking to resolve the conflict in your relationship. A more assertive intervention would be to view your employee's behavior as a performance issue. The workplace is an environment where employees customarily exchange civilities. Acting appropriately is therefore a reasonable expectation. Your employee's behavior creates a work environment that is offensive, which can interfere with productivity. This is why employee performance evaluations often judge interpersonal skills.

◆ I described my employee as "moody" on his performance evaluation, but he succeeded in having the statement removed. I thought this term was precise and descriptive, but have been told it was too vague. What else could I have written?

Although you believe the word "moody" adequately describes the behavior of your employee, he is entitled to a more precise description of his attitude or conduct on the job so he can consider changing it. If your employee is given to changeable emotional states, especially that of gloom, then use such language to describe his behavior and provide an example. Avoid words that label, incite emotion, or require others to ask, "What do you mean by _____?" Also, document the effect of the problematic behavior on others or the work environment. Documentation written in this manner benefits the employee and the organization. The employee has tangible feedback necessary to consider change, and language is adequate enough for others in your organization who may have to rely upon it to support administrative actions that may later be necessary.

◆ I would like to improve the morale of my work group, but can't offer any monetary incentives or other tangible rewards. What can I do?

Most employees welcome monetary awards, but management research demonstrates that such awards alone will not sustain improved morale. Meaningful relationships and feeling valued will mean more. Here are four powerful steps any supervisor can take that will either help improve morale or keep it from getting worse: 1) Be accessible and approachable to your employees. Make conscious choices to listen, put your work down, and meet their needs to discuss work problems and receive feedback. 2) Morale difficulties mean that employees need to talk. Do not avoid the tough discussions needed for problem solving. 3) Visit employees where they work or create products. Let them see that you are involved and part of the business of the day. 4) Act quickly on problems you commit to solving. Employees will not forget the things you promise. None of these steps necessarily costs money, but you can win influence and improve morale with each one.

◆ Why should supervisors not attempt to make any distinction as to what type of performance problem justifies a supervisor referral to the EAP? I can think of a few poor performers who I know had no personal problems in need of EAP services.

All supervisor referrals to an EAP should be based upon performance. And any employee with a performance problem should be referred to an EAP if the supervisor's attempts to correct it are not successful. These two foundation principles of referral to employee assistance programs are based upon key observations in intervening with troubled employees. First, some types of health conditions and personal problems cannot be self-diagnosed or identified by others without specific knowledge and interviewing skills. Second, awareness of some personal problems stay hidden from the victim and others by denial and other defense mechanisms or lack of awareness that completely mask the existence of the illness. Examples include many health and mental health conditions in early stages or their less acute form that only a trained clinician could identify.

Notes:

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